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ABSTRACT

The Speech Department at New Jersey's Brookdale Community College conducted a study to determine if cooperative learning strategies could be effectively incorporated into a basic public speaking course to enhance student outcomes. The course was revised by reducing the number of speech performances and adding cooperative learning experiences. Instruction in the course became less teacher-directed as students taught each other through the completion of group assignments. In addition, the grading procedure was redesigned to encourage student participation in the cooperative learning activities, awarding points non-qualitatively for the completion of assignments. To determine the effectiveness of the revised course, questionnaires were distributed to instructors and students in the course in winter 1996, specifically asking teachers to rate the extent that expected benefits of the new format had been achieved and students to rate the cooperative learning strategies used. Responses were received from 151 of 369 enrolled students and all 9 instructors teaching course sections. For teachers, none of the anticipated benefits were felt to have significantly accrued, while elements resulting in slight benefits included increased student problem-solving skills, ability to work in groups, and grades. Students, however, repeatedly mentioned the reduction of performance anxiety as a benefit of participating in cooperative learning groups. The survey instruments are appended. Contains 11 references. (TGI)

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STUDENT AS TEACHER: COOPERATIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE CLASSROOM

by

Carol L. Hunter

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Student As Teacher: Cooperative Learning Strategies
In The Community College Classroom
by
Carol L. Hunter

"Cooperative learning encompasses both a teaching philosophy and instructional methods that encourage students to work together in groups to maximize learning" (Cinelli 99). The traditional role of teacher is expanded to include facilitator and coordinator of the student groups, which then assume part of the responsibility for instruction. The cooperative learning model, variously described in the literature as "collaborative learning," "experiential learning," or "community of learners," has gained popularity over the last decade. It has been used successfully at every educational level from the primary grades through graduate school, and across diverse academic disciplines.[1]

The belief that cooperative learning strategies could be effectively incorporated into the basic public speaking course to enhance student outcomes led the Brookdale Community College Speech Department to revise its basic course program. This paper will discuss the multiple factors which motivated faculty to undertake the course revision, faculty expectations and reservations concerning implementation of the cooperative learning model, and faculty/student attitudes toward cooperative learning, post revision, accessed through questionnaires and selected interviews.

Experimental and descriptive studies on the subject of cooperative learning support claims that the method can yield a large number of specific benefits to adult learners. The literature to a lesser degree, however, also raises concerns regarding difficulties in implementation, as well as possible negative consequences for students. Many of the factors discussed in the literature are echoed in the attitudes of faculty and students interviewed for this paper. References to specific articles, which discuss aspects of cooperative learning similar to those raised in the faculty and student attitude surveys and interviews discussed herein, will be highlighted in this paper.

Each year approximately 1150 students enroll in the 46 sections of Effective Speech (SPH 115), the basic public speaking course at Brookdale Community

[1] Bruffee makes an interesting distinction between the terms "cooperative learning" and "collaborative learning". The former can help younger children to gain social skills and foundational knowledge, whereas the latter is used with adolescents and adults to enhance nonfoundational education (Bruffee 162).

College. The course traditionally required students to design and deliver 7 speeches over the semester. Student learning experiences included: (1) lecture, (2) assigned textbook readings, and (3) instructor-led class critiques of student speeches. Little or no time was available for group activities or process work of any kind. Students' grades in the course were dependent solely on their grades for the 7 speeches.

Several instructors had used cooperative learning strategies successfully in other courses and were frustrated by the tightly scheduled format of SPH 115 (2/3 of the class sessions were devoted to student speeches and evaluation, with 1/3 of the course devoted to lecture). They expressed dissatisfaction with the course emphasis on graded performances as opposed to learning activities, and suspected that this design served to increase performance anxiety, lower the energy level of the students and ultimately contribute to attrition. These areas of dissatisfaction with the non-collaborative model served as significant motivation to revise the basic course.

Further motivation to redesign Effective Speech was provided by our department's participation in Vision 2020, a faculty development workshop held at Brookdale in 1995, which had as its keynote speaker futurist Ed Barlow. The program focused on educating for the 21st century and highlighted the changing needs of the community college student. Our speech faculty became firmly convinced that the ability to work in groups, appreciation for cultural diversity, increased problem solving skills, enhanced ability to access information and utilize technology were essential skills for our students. The desire to incorporate these goals into SPH 115 became an important factor in the decision to change the curriculum.

The basic public speaking course was revised at the end of the winter 1995 term and taught for the first time in the fall 1995 semester. The number of graded speech performances was reduced to 3 from the original 7, and 6 cooperative learning experiences (workshop activities) were added to the course. Instruction in the course became less teacher directed as students were given the responsibility to teach each other through the completion of the group assignments. The design sought to maximize active learning.

These group assignments include the following: (1) Students present 2 - minute informative speeches during the second class session. These speeches are videotaped and each student reviews his taped performance in a small group during class time. Group members are required to help each other formulate personal delivery goals which are submitted to the instructor; (2) After some preliminary

instruction, students are put into groups of 5 members each and given an hour to work together to construct an informative speech which is then presented to the class by the entire group (or one member whom they select); (3) Students of various skill levels work together in small groups on specific tasks involving the location, retrieval and evaluation of information in the library. This activity gives students the chance to teach each other basic library skills, while the instructor and librarian assist students with advanced work; (4) Following a lecture on interest generating devices, students work in groups to plan specific revisions of their research informative speeches delivered in class 8. Ideas generated are shared with the entire class and students present the revised speeches in the following session; (5) 2 classes are spent in preparation for the persuasive speech, the third and most difficult graded speech assignment. In this session students meet in small groups to review each others' topic selections. They are expected to share their ideas concerning the topics and provide information useful in audience analysis. (6) Student groups review each member's proposition, bibliography and research materials for the persuasive speech. This is a working session where students troubleshoot potential problems in the speech preparation and make useful suggestions.

Points, which figure in the final course grade, are given for participation in each workshop activity. These points are earned by participation in and completion of the activity and are not qualitative. Students may earn a maximum of 80 points for participation in workshop activities 1 through 4 (points earned for activities 5 and 6 are considered part of the persuasive speech grade). Students earn between 70 and 140 points for each of the three graded speech assignments. 70-100 points roughly corresponds to a "C" grade, 101-120 to a "B", and 121-140 to an "A"[2]

The grading procedure was designed to encourage student participation in the cooperative learning activities. Students who earn more than 50 workshop points will likely find their final grade enhanced as a result, particularly if their speech grade points are not close to the maximum available for the grade desired (eg. a student earning a 70 point "C" grade on one speech and a 101 point "B" grade on each of his other two graded speeches could earn a 352 point total for a final grade of "B", if he earned the full 80 participation points). Earning less than 50 participation points is likely to adversely affect the final grade (eg. a student earning a 70 point "C" grade on

[2] Brookdale Community College uses the designation "Credit", Credit Honors," and "Credit High Honors" in place of the more traditional "C", "B", and "A".

each of his 3 speeches would fall short of the 260 points needed to pass the course unless he earned 50 workshop points). The 440 points required for a course grade of "A" could not be earned without workshop points, even if the student had earned the maximum points available on each graded speech.

Clearly the grading system devised could result in the group work exceeding 10% of the final grade, as discouraged by Cooper (1995). Faculty raised the prevalent concern that points earned for cooperative learning experiences constitute an appropriate portion of the final grade. (Sego 1991).

The decision to adopt cooperative learning strategies was significantly influenced by positive reports in the academic literature, according to a survey of the 4 full time faculty members involved in the course revision. Although none mentioned specific research when interviewed, all made reference to potential benefits of cooperative learning strategies similar to those cited in recent articles supporting the technique. Interviews with faculty revealed their recognition of the importance of increasing our students' capacity for working in groups at a time when the "team approach" has become an integral component of the contemporary workplace (Sego 1991). The active participation of students, increased cognitive skills, greater student satisfaction and higher retention rates reported by Cooper (1995), were also listed as expectations in response to the question: "What were your primary goals/expectations in revising the basic public speaking course?" Courtney,Courtney, and Nicholson (472) review many benefits of cooperative learning including reduced performance anxiety (Ames 1984), the promotion of higher level problem solving skills (Thomas, Iventosch and Rohwer 1986) and increased willingness to use feedback constructively (Austin 1987), all mentioned by the faculty surveyed. Cooperative learning as a means of encouraging an appreciation for cultural diversity was also mentioned (Manning and Lucking 1993). Furthermore, faculty expected that increased group activities would help combat the boredom that can result during the 3 hour class period[3] and help address the problem of our students' shrinking attention span.

Several institutional factors seen as positive supports for adoption of the cooperative learning model caused faculty to be optimistic. First, Brookdale Community College has a non-competitive, non-punative grading system. Students are graded according to mastery of predefined performance objectives. Only successful completion of unit or course objectives is recorded. Students therefore do

[3] Most classes at Brookdale Community College meet once a week for 3 hours.

not fail, but rather work at their own pace to do and redo work until they have completed requirements for the particular grade level they seek (or until they withdraw). This non-competitive institutional culture could enable our department to avoid the problems encountered in other college environments where cooperative learning is seen as a challenge to individualism and competition.

The excellent group management skills of the Speech Department regular and adjunct faculty members was a second factor favoring successful adoption of cooperative learning strategies. All teachers reported at least some experience with the technique in response to the question "How would you describe your prior familiarity with the cooperative learning philosophy and methodology?" Most had expressed interest in incorporating these strategies into the course.

The availability of excellent support services also encouraged the use of cooperative learning. The Department had access to telecommunications services which would allow us to videotape our students' performances for subsequent group analysis. A media specialist was assigned by the Learning Resource Center to help Speech Department faculty develop instructional materials and cooperative learning activities designed to teach research skills utilizing current technology. The media specialist also would become part of the teaching team for the research unit, allowing for the more effective monitoring of student groups. Lastly, the Speech Department learning assistant, a paraprofessional whose primary job responsibility is to provide individual instruction for those students in need of extra help, could be utilized to monitor group out of class activity.

The fact that Brookdale Community College had been founded on the Personalized System of Instruction Model was one constraint for adopting cooperative learning. Although multiple course sections of SPH 115 scheduled throughout the week, during morning, afternoon and evening hours, could provide attendance options for students who might miss a group activity because of lateness or absence, there was still some concern that the student's ability to work at his own pace, and to make up work missed, would be compromised by the new model. Brookdale's students are commuters; most work full or part-time, and they vary greatly in academic ability. All of these factors might suggest the appropriateness of a highly individualized curriculum rather than a cooperative learning curriculum.

Faculty concerns regarding the incorporation of cooperative learning strategies closely mirrored those raised in the literature. They questioned the ability to balance

traditional classroom activities and cooperative activities. Other potential problems mentioned were inadequate student group processing skills, lack of student participation, interpersonal problems within student groups, including dissent, cliques, and an undue burden on gifted students, as reported by Matthews (1992). Difficulty in forming groups and inefficient delivery of course content were also cited.

Student and teacher attitudes toward the revised SPH 115 curriculum were assessed during the last two months of the Winter 1996 semester through the administration of two separate questionnaires. 151 students responded to the survey out of a population 369 active enrollees (41%). 100% of the 9 SPH 115 teachers responded. The teacher questionnaire focused on the degree to which expected benefits and difficulties reported by the faculty at the outset of the project, and discussed in the academic literature, actually materialized. The student survey attempted to gauge student perceptions and attitudes relative to the cooperative learning strategies used in the course. Both questionnaires asked subjects to respond to questions using a four point scale.

Teachers were asked the degree to which 9 specific benefits occurred following the revision of SPH 115. Possible responses included: A - not at all (1 point), B - slightly (2 points), C - significantly (3 points), or D - not sure (0 points). None of the anticipated benefits were felt to have significantly accrued.

None of the teachers felt that the revision had increased course completion rates more than slightly (average response was 1.57). It should be noted that no comparison of actual student completion rates pre and post revision was made. No teachers believed that the absentee rate had decreased any more than slightly. Of the 9 teachers, 7 felt that there had been a slight improvement but 2 answered "not at all" (1.78). Teachers did not believe that the cooperative learning strategies had enhanced appreciation for cultural diversity (1.4), nor did they see a reduction in performance anxiety (1.62).

Students, on the other hand, repeatedly mentioned the reduction of performance anxiety as a perceived benefit of participation in their cooperative learning groups. The following comments were typical: "You get to meet new people and become comfortable with your audience." "Becoming more comfortable with other students lets you be more open and relaxed."

Other benefits which teachers perceived as accruing slightly or better included increased student problem solving skills (2.0), enhanced student ability to process

feedback (2.14), improved student ability to work in groups (2.22), and increased student attention in class (2.17).

Teachers also felt that the course revision contributed to improved student grades (2.11). When asked whether grade inflation, a difficulty which had been predicted prior to the course revision, had materialized, faculty response averaged 1.78, with 4 responding "not at all," 3 "slightly," and 2 "significantly." Student response to the question: "were you satisfied with the way your group activities influenced the grade you received in this course?" were more than satisfied (3.27).[4] Of the 147 respondents, only 8 were dissatisfied and 1 very dissatisfied. Students responding to the question: "What did you like about working in groups in this class?" mentioned "how it influenced my grade," and "the extra points I earned."

Teachers did not perceive any of the 9 potential difficulties in implementation of cooperative learning, predicted at the outset of the course revision and reported in the academic literature., as materializing even slightly. Teacher response fell between "not at all" and "slightly" when asked about the occurrence of inadequate student group processing skills (1.75), difficulty in forming balanced groups (1.71), restriction of student ability to work at his own pace (1,86), and the formation of cliques in class (1.5).[5]

"Not at all," was the unanimous response of the 9 teachers when asked whether the use of cooperative learning strategies had led to inefficient delivery of course content. This response was supported by their comments on the questionnaire, such as: "[We had] more time to focus on the dynamics of speech making through class exercises;" "I can spend more time evaluating each student," and "scheduling allowed more time for students to improve."

Overall, instructors did not feel that there had been interpersonal problems within student groups (1.78). However, instructors did make reference to interpersonal difficulties in their survey comments (for example: "some groups did not mesh." "One student of mine requested that she not be grouped with a male classmate whom she found intimidating.").

Although students also perceived their groups to have worked together satisfactorily (3.49), with only one of the 150 respondents replying "poorly" to the

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[4] For this question possible responses were: very satisfied (4 points), satisfied (3 points), dissatisfied (2 points), or very dissatisfied (1 point).

[5] One student respondent asked to indicate what he disliked about the technique noted that "students are already familiar with each other and form their own little groups."

question "how well did your groups work together," student comments did indicate interpersonal difficulties. In response to the question: "What did you dislike about working in groups in this class," students mentioned the fact that some people could not get along. They cited "bossiness", some members of the group not doing their fair share of the work, "difficult personalities," and uncooperative group members among the specific interpersonal problems encountered.

Instructors did not believe that cooperative learning activities had placed an undue burden on "gifted" students (1.33) One teacher wrote, "I observed that 'gifted' students often sought out the weaker students in group activities in an attempt to help. In the LRC [learning resource center] students who had prior knowledge were willing to assist others, some of whom were visiting the LRC for the first time."

Some student comments, however, did reveal resentment of underprepared classmates who were perceived as not making meaningful contributions to the group. One respondent wrote that he disliked "having to listen to opinions [of], or having to be rated by people of marginal initiative and/or intelligence."

Despite the difficulties noted, students overwhelmingly enjoyed working in groups according to survey results. 132 students responded to the question: "How did you feel about working in groups in this course?" Student response averaged 3.45, between "I liked working in groups (3.0) and "I liked working in groups a great deal" (4.0). 18 students were neutral; 5 answered "disliked", and none responded "strongly disliked". These results parallel the findings of Courtney, Courtney, and Nicholson (1994). Results of their survey of the graduate education students who had participated in a cooperative format class as part of a study, indicated that "96% felt positively about the cooperative learning methodology" (475).

"Working in groups made the class fun," one SPH 115 student wrote. Another wrote, "I enjoyed sharing with others and learning from them." These comments were fairly typical of the student survey response. Not only did students enjoy the learning experience, but most of them felt that cooperative learning strategies had helped them master the course material (3.145). Only 9 of the respondents felt that the group work had not been helpful.

Teachers surveyed made the following comments on specific strategies which they felt worked particularly well in the course. Having clear objectives for each group exercise helped keep groups on track and guarded against inefficient use of time. Close monitoring of group work by the instructor also helped guard against wasted

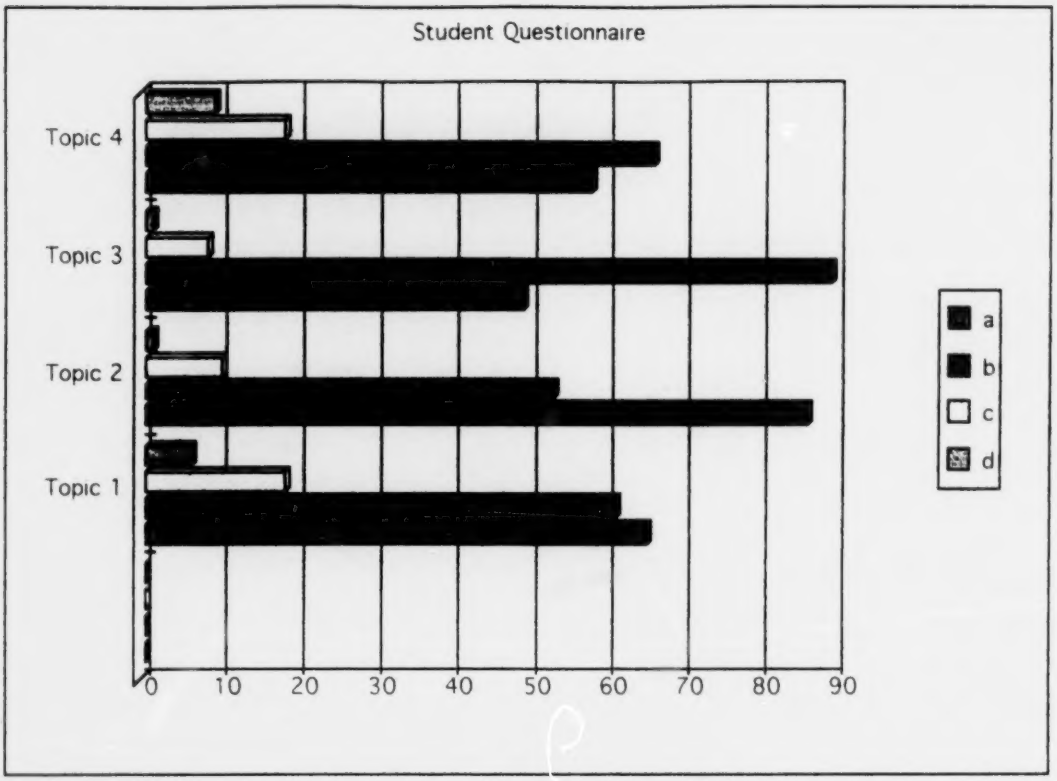
time and encouraged students to actively participate. Having students assume a teaching role was beneficial in maximizing individual instruction for those in need of special help and at the same time built student confidence. Having the group work count toward the course grade encouraged broader participation in the workshop activities. Emphasizing process rather than product evaluation for a large part of the course, seems to alleviate some student stress and gives the instructor a clearer idea of exactly where a particular student may be having trouble with course material.

Techniques which did not work well, teachers felt, included the grading point system, which can be confusing to the students. The speech department will be working to simplify the point system. Teachers were also concerned that there was no mechanism for students who were absent for legitimate reasons to make up the points lost by failing to participate in the cooperative learning activity. Students who had suffered an extended illness found their ability to earn a good grade in the course seriously compromised no matter how hard they might work to catch up.

It is interesting to note, that although the course was revised by the 4 full-time faculty members without consulting the adjunct faculty, there was no appreciable difference in survey results for the regular versus the adjunct faculty members, nor were there differences in the survey results of their respective students. In retrospect, the speech department would have been well advised to involve adjunct faculty in the course revision process. Instructor enthusiasm for the cooperative learning techniques can be a very important factor in the success of the methodology.

This paper has examined teacher attitudes prior to the decision to revise the basic public speaking course to include cooperative learning strategies, and it has examined teacher and student attitudes post course revision in an effort to assess how closely their perceptions resemble published descriptions of the positive and negative aspects of cooperative learning. While teacher/student perceptions, descriptive analyses, and anecdotal evidence can be valuable, it would seem that objective evidence as to the relative efficacy of these techniques can be highly instructive. Future research which compares such outcomes as course completion rates, grade distribution, subsequent enrollment in second level or advanced courses within the discipline, for students enrolled in the traditional basic public speaking course and those participating in a cooperative learning model, can serve as a reliable indicator of the effectiveness of cooperative learning strategies. In the final analysis, based on the subjective data presented herein, the Brookdale Community College Speech

Department has found the use of cooperative learning strategies to be beneficial for our students, and we plan to continue these strategies in the basic public speaking course.



STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How did you feel about working in groups in this course? (circle the response that most closely describes your attitude)
    a. I liked working in groups a great deal.
    b. I liked working in groups.
    c. I neither liked nor disliked working in groups.
    d. I disliked working in groups.
    e. I strongly disliked working in groups.
2. How well did your groups work together?
    a. Very well
    b. Satisfactory
    c. Some problems
    d. Poorly
3. Were you satisfied with the way your group activities influenced the grade you received in this course?
    a. Very satisfied
    b. Satisfied
    c. Dissatisfied
    d. Very dissatisfied
4. How well did the group activities in Speech 115 help you master the material studied in the course?
    a. Very helpful
    b. helpful
    c. Slightly helpful
    d. Not helpful

Teacher Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions concerning your attitudes prior to the 1995 revision of Speech 115.

1. What was your primary motivation for revising the basic public speaking course?

2. To what degree was your decision to incorporate cooperative learning strategies influenced by positive reports in the academic literature?
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Mostly

3. To what degree did your dissatisfaction with the traditional public speaking course motivate your decision to revise the basic course?
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Mostly

4. What were your primary areas of dissatisfaction with the non-collaborative model?

5. What were your primary goals/expectations in revising the basic public speaking course?

6. What areas of difficulty, if any, did you predict

7. How would you describe your prior familiarity with the cooperative learning philosophy and methodology?

Teacher Post-Revision Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions concerning your attitudes toward the 1995 revision of Speech 115. **The results of this survey will be used to structure subsequent interviews and are not meant to be used as a statistical sample of teacher attitude.**

1. To what degree did the following benefits occur following the revision of Speech 115?

   A. increased course completion rates
      a. Not at all
      b. Slightly
      c. Significantly
      d. Not Sure

   B. reduced performance anxiety
      a. Not at all
      b. Slightly
      c. Significantly
      d. Not Sure

   C. Enhanced student ability to process feedback
      a. Not at all
      b. Slightly
      c. Significantly
      d. Not Sure

   D. Improved student ability to work in groups
      a. Not at all
      b. Slightly
      c. Significantly
      d. Not Sure

   E. Enhanced student appreciation for cultural diversity
      a. Not at all
      b. Slightly
      c. Significantly
      d. Not Sure

   F. Increased student problem solving skills
      a. Not at all
      b. Slightly
      c. Significantly
      d. Not Sure

   G. Decreased absentee rate
      a. Not at all
      b. Slightly
      c. Significantly
      d. Not Sure

H. Increased Student Attention In Class
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Not Sure

I. Improved Student Grades
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Not Sure

2. Please list any additional benefits which you feel accrued from the course revision.

3. What do you feel were the difficulties in using cooperative learning strategies in Speech 115?

4. To what degree did the difficulties predicted at the outset of the Speech 115 course revision process materialize?

A. Lack Of Student Participation?
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Not Sure

B. Interpersonal Problems Within Student Groups
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Not Sure

C. Grade Inflation
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Not Sure

D. Inadequate Group Processing Skills
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Not Sure

E. Difficulty In Forming "Balanced" Groups?
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Not Sure

F. Restriction Of Student Ability To Work At His Own Pace
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Not Sure

G. Formation Of Cliques In The Class
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Not Sure

H. Inefficient Delivery Of Course Content
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Not Sure

I. Placement Of An Undue Burden On "Gifted" Students
   a. Not at all
   b. Slightly
   c. Significantly
   d. Not Sure

5. What specific strategies worked particularly well in this course?

6. What specific strategies did not work well in this course?

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